

Traveler, Peddler, Stranger, Syrian

Queer Provocations and Sexual Threats

*The wild plum-blossoms fluttered in the lane,
Like fairy lace hung out to dry,
After the playful coming of the rain
From a clear sky.*

*The Syrian peddler shook the clinging drops
Of water from his heavy pack,
With laughter that the farmer at his crops
Must bend his back.*

*The men were plowing in a black-loamed field,
And they were far enough away
To leave the house safe for a wife to yield
To his display.*

*A bashful farmgirl met him at the door—
Her mother looked up in surprise.
Quickly he spread his wares upon the floor,
Peddler-wise.*

*Bright-colored silks and laces billowed out
In airy grace from skillful hands. . . .
The girl had in her eyes the weary doubt
Of lonely lands.*

*The woman's eyes were brighter—having seen,
She sighed, "Put back the pretty stuff—
My daughter's only twelve, she'll be sixteen
Soon enough!"*

—GLENN WARD DRESBACH, "THE SYRIAN PEDDLER"

As Syrian peddlers traveled through rural spaces of the United States and interacted with people outside their own immigrant communities, curiosity and anxiety grew about their presence. Such feelings were often expressed in popular portrayals of the Syrian peddler, particularly Syrian men. Peddlers appeared in poetry, short stories, novels, and children's books, as well as in the news media. Regardless of the format, all of these genres put Syrian difference on display for the American public in two distinct ways. First, Syrian peddlers brought what was understood as exotic difference to the doorsteps of aspiring-middle-class Americans via the goods that peddlers offered for sale as well as their own racialized bodies. While household staples such as sewing materials, soap, and linens were essential in a peddler's pack, so were items like Jerusalem holy water, rosaries, lace, and silk that elicited fantasies of far-off places. Second, male Syrian peddlers supposedly posed a sexual threat to the women who purchased their goods. The manufacturers of this threat imagined white women and their daughters, the epicenter of the domestic middle-class idyll, being home alone and defenseless against the seductions of the peddler and his wares. Recurring through these themes of difference was the idea that manipulation and seduction—qualities particular to the Oriental character—were central to the peddler's economic success.

Glenn Ward Dresbach's 1924 poem "The Syrian Peddler" demonstrates such an imagined scenario. The peddler, who has escaped the toil of working the land, laughs that the farmer "must bend his back." (The irony here is that that peddlers' packs were often quite heavy and carrying them around was physically taxing.) While the (men) farmers are occupied, the peddler can take advantage of the women of the home. The scene that Dresbach describes between the peddler, a mother, and her daughter is one of seduction. The language of "yielding" signals that the peddler's sales display is a temptation for both the mother and the daughter. The mother's caution that the young daughter will "be sixteen / Soon enough!" points to the daughter's impending sexual maturity. Is the daughter imagined to be ready to yield to the peddler's goods or to the peddler himself—or both?

The curiosity and anxiety about Syrian peddlers thus also contained underlying desire for this racially and sexually different figure. The Syrian peddler was at once alluring and deviant. This positioning, along with the numerous possibilities for different sexual intimacies enabled by long-distance peddling, makes the Syrian peddler a queer figure—one of sexual excess, one threatening to white settler heteronormativity.

This chapter traces the lineage of the Syrian peddler as a queer figure through the archival legacies of long-distance peddlers and the representations of Syrian peddlers in popular culture. In short stories, poems, plays, and other literary works, Syrian peddlers, particularly men, are depicted as the bearers of exotic excitement, sources of seductive danger, and manufacturers of deceit. The encounter between a Syrian man and a naive white woman at her doorstep plays out repeatedly in these representations. The threat of this racial and sexual encounter

is ever present. The use of Orientalism and questions of modernity in defining the sexual and gender difference of Syrians reveals the anxieties that peddlers evoked about white racial purity, masculinity, and sexual normalcy. The experiences of peddlers themselves also bear out these anxieties, albeit in different ways. They also demand that we reckon with the opportunities that peddling opened for a variety of sexual experiences outside heterosexual monogamous marriage.

Syrian peddlers were facilitators of settler colonialism: they made the stealing of Native lands in the American West and Midwest more feasible for white settlers by providing the convenience of access to goods that rural areas often lacked in comparison with cities. But at the same time that Syrian peddlers played a crucial role in this process, their perceived racial and sexual difference threatened the white-held power in the communities that they helped to shape. The peddlers were queer figures in a landscape struggling to normalize itself according to a middle-class, white American ideal. Remembering these figures and understanding the labor, desire, and anxiety associated with them interrupt the racialized nostalgia of US settler colonial history, as well as the narrations of early Arab American history that ignore sexuality as a formative rubric.

This chapter examines representations of male Syrian peddlers in popular media and shows how these depictions betray racial and sexual anxieties about the presence of Syrian immigrants within US society. The Syrian peddler became a vessel for white American concerns about the economic position of white business owners, the purity and virtue of white women, and the overall demographic changes in the American citizenry. The figure of the peddler proved highly flexible for these purposes. The anxieties surrounding peddlers hinged specifically on the notion of a racialized sexual difference inherent in Syrian and other Southwest Asian men. At the same time, desire surfaced along with these anxieties, stemming from the fabricated exoticism of the so-called Oriental. I focus on a very specific iteration of these instances of representation—the musical *Oklahoma!* and the original play that preceded it—because they allow a comparison of the portrayal of the Syrian peddler in the same story across different temporalities of Arab American history. Through these artistic works, the figure of the Syrian peddler has surreptitiously reverberated in US popular culture for decades.

Taken alongside these representations, the social history of Syrian peddlers both allows an analysis of these representations' effects and forces us to grapple with questions of what we can know, how we can know it, and how we might strain beyond those limitations with regard to peddler sexuality. Moving between the material and the discursive here, as well as between social history and the literary and representational, also connects and blurs the fictive and the real.

I thus stitch a thread in this chapter between discursivity and embodiment. That is, the knowledge produced through textuality is related to the material experiences of Syrian peddlers through the desires involved in spectatorship (of the plays and musical discussed herein), readership (of local papers that sensationalized

Syrian peddling life), and research (my own). For example, we can imagine that the readers of local papers who learned about the arrival of Syrians and their strange customs were both titillated and repelled. Audiences of *Oklahoma!* delighted at the sinewy and seductive trickster nature of the peddler character. And I, the researcher, navigate my own desire to locate, name, and substantiate sexual excess in my own family history—and in the historical records of other Syrians—through historical-grounded imagining. These queer desires of spectators, of readers, and of the researcher (myself) motivate the engagement with embodiment. Desire is a way to approximate embodiment, preventing an intellectualization of discourse; and these multiple queer desires are where those threads of discursivity and embodiment loop together.¹ “Queer” here may look and feel differently than what we are used to. Following Kadji Amin, I use queer as a method that is, at its core, multiply affective and multiply historicist.²

A MOVING TARGET: VIOLENCE ON THE ROAD

Syrian peddlers experienced both physical and discursive violence in their lives in the United States. In the news clippings I examine below, I detail an aversion to (and sensationalizing of) peddlers. That averse outlook ranged from suspicion to mistrust to outright fear—and, in some instances, to unacknowledged desire and fantasy. At the core was an anxiety about the strangeness of Syrians and the rootlessness of their transient labor. Dierdre Moloney notes that the anxieties provoked by immigrant peddlers, including Syrians, stemmed from their economic position and its perceived consequences: “As economic middlemen, [peddlers] traveled extensively across borders rather than being rooted deeply in one community. As such, they could not be easily contained or monitored, and posed a metaphorical threat to U.S. citizens.”³

These anxieties had emotional, social, and physical repercussions for Syrians. But Arab American historiography (and the archives from which it draws) does not often dwell on this unease and uncertainty in its telling of peddling experiences. The preeminent social historian of early Arab America, Alixa Naff, doggedly asked after experiences of discrimination and othering when she interviewed first- and second-generation Syrian Americans in the 1960s. Even so, an overwhelming number of her participants denied that they experienced discrimination. Despite the prevalence of such narratives—indeed, such fiction—every so often an interview is clearly shot through with longing and pain, in which the violence of separation from the land of one’s birth and of the encounter with white supremacy refuses to remain submerged. Elias Lebos provided one such interview.

Born in the village of Rachaya, Elias Lebos first came to the United States in 1896 at the age of twenty-nine. After arriving in New York, Lebos went directly to Fort Wayne, Indiana. Fort Wayne was a known supplier hub for Syrian peddlers, where newcomers could be trained to take up the work quickly and be equipped

with goods to sell and routes to travel. Whenever Lebos and a group of other Syrian men left from Fort Wayne, they walked about sixty-five miles over the course of the week. They slept in farmhouses during the week and in boardinghouses in a town over the weekend. Every Saturday, they wrote to their supplier with a list of goods they needed and where they would be the following Saturday to receive those goods. Lebos peddled like this for approximately two and a half years, sending a hundred dollars a month back home to his family, until he returned to Rachaya.

He came to the United States again in the early 1900s and spent considerable time peddling in Minnesota. Remarking on this second peddling stint, he exclaimed in an interview: “No terrible experience passed me by. Sometimes a town would be too difficult for us or sometimes difficulties would be too much or we would be kicked away by customers or get so tired we couldn’t walk any more or there’d be mud and puddles and rain—and suffering—Leave it to God how we suffered.”⁴ Lebos thus listed various ways the vague “difficulties” posed an impediment to this way of making a living. What made a town “too difficult,” and what made those difficulties “too much”? In reading that they would be “kicked away by customers,” one can begin to envision the social and physical ostracization that Lebos and his kin confronted. Lebos’s recollection blended into the realities of working and traveling continuously outdoors: mud, puddles, rain, and suffering. Lebos then elaborated that the kind of physical difficulties he encountered while peddling were also social and racist in nature: “In Minnesota, the Bohemians, Swedes, and Norwegians would chase me to kill me.” At the time, Lebos was traveling with four other men, who, like him, had come from Rachaya to the United States. Lebos managed to hide from the men who were chasing them. Once they were gone, he hid his suitcases, climbed a tree, and strapped himself to it with rope so that he would not fall if he fell asleep. He stayed there through the night and realized that he was completely alone only the next morning. About his companions, Lebos remarked: “We don’t know if they were killed but no one ever heard from them again. They vanished.” Once he was on his own, he got sick: “I don’t know what my sickness was—fatigue, depression, neglecting [my] health. Who knows. Many of us experienced illness and depression.”⁵ Such a firsthand account of racist violence and of the profound effect it had on Syrian immigrant health is quite rare in the archives. More often than not, Syrian immigrants and their US-born children either minimized racist othering or characterized their experiences as being devoid of racism altogether.⁶

For other peddlers, the ostracism they encountered came at night, when they looked for shelter. Essa Malooley, who also came from Rachaya, recounted difficulties he had in finding a place to sleep on his peddling trips: “We slept at farmers’ houses. Yes, many times I was turned away because maybe they were afraid of peddlers or something. No, they didn’t turn me away because I was an Arab. They never asked me what I was. Peddlers looked poor.”⁷ Malooley remained certain

that he was not turned away because he was Arab; it was because he was a peddler. But poverty and class are also racialized; and an accent, a darker skin tone, and a markedly non-European phenotype would have signaled foreignness. Malooley, then, was turned away because of multiple forms of assumed or actual difference between himself and his potential customers.

In another example, the brother of Alice Abraham left from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to try his hand at peddling. She recounted in an interview that he almost froze one night because “no one would give him a place to sleep.” Finally, he asked a farmer to let him sleep in his barn, but the man made him come inside instead, where he could be more easily surveilled. While sleeping indoors might seem more ideal than spending the night in a barn, the farmer proceeded to walk around with a gun in his hand the whole night. Alice’s brother was not able to sleep that night and was determined never to peddle again after that trip.⁸

Others recounted similar experiences, including a Druze Syrian man whose life story was published almost a decade after his peddling days. Ed Aryain (born Mohammed Aryain) remembered that although he encountered many hospitable homes during his peddling trips, there were “many times which were far worse,” including being “turned down at dozens of houses,” doors being slammed in his face, an angry man telling him to go away because “his kind” was not wanted. Years later, Aryain still remembered how much these incidents hurt; they continued to haunt him.⁹

The physical violence that Syrian peddlers feared was not merely hypothetical. Beginning in the late 1880s, news articles described violence against peddlers occurring in rural areas. In one example, a Syrian peddler went missing in 1891 in Pennsylvania. The peddler’s son found his father’s peddling pack abandoned on the Susquehanna River bank. Spots of blood were nearby. The son suspected that the father had been murdered for the money he carried on him from selling his goods.¹⁰ In another example, a married couple peddled together in West Virginia. After they took separate routes, the husband disappeared. The wife believed he had been murdered for his money and goods.¹¹ Other peddlers were beaten or murdered and then robbed: “Two bullet holes in the [peddler’s] body told the tale of [his] ending” in Tennessee.¹² In West Virginia, two men were convicted of killing a Syrian peddler; one was given the death penalty (a sentence that a new trial later changed to a life sentence). Papers reported that the man had said “the damn peddlers ought all be killed.”¹³

In this last instance, the two perpetrators of violence were white men. In every other instance, however, if the assailants were identified at all, they were invariably Black, Native, or Syrian. An 1893 news report from Mason County, Washington, told of a Syrian peddler killed by a stray bullet, but some believed he was murdered. He and another Syrian had just left the Skokomish Indian reservation in the area, where they had sold jewelry. The report proclaimed that the “cheap, trashy jewelry carried by the peddlers is just the thing to please the Indian fancy and that

robbery might have been the incentive.”¹⁴ In Meridian, Mississippi, another Syrian peddler was brutally murdered and robbed. The news article reported the gory details in this way: a group of white men found the peddler’s body and then traced the blood back to a house where four Black men were found dividing the peddler’s money. The Black men—the presumed assailants—then “disappeared, and it is stated that they were put to death.”¹⁵ On their face, these articles collectively show that all sorts of people—not just white Americans—could harbor animus for Syrian peddlers and act upon it. But the paucity of named white assailants is suspicious, all the more so given the swift “justice” that followed in the many cases in which assailants were nonwhite.

How does this violence matter for thinking about Syrian peddlers and sexuality? The threat that Syrian difference posed to Americans was always predicated on a sexual difference—that is, Syrian peddlers’ ability to persuade and entice, via the goods they sold, was closely linked to the idea that they could persuade sexually as well. In the post–Civil War era, when anxiety over miscegenation was reaching its apex, racist violence was inextricably linked to sexual and gendered panics.

PEDDLERS AS PESTS: RACIAL CAPITALISM, WHITE GENDERED FEAR, AND DISCURSIVE VIOLENCE

White Americans’ fear of Syrians also contributed to discursive violence against them in the press, often manifesting as alarm about Syrians’ arrival and their work as peddlers. One category of early articles, from the 1880s and 1890s, includes sensationalized reports of groups of Syrians arriving or being detained at US ports of entry. Headlines like “Masters of Mendicants” and “‘Sanctified’ Arab Tramps” contributed to a discourse that said all Syrians were beggars and shiftless transients.¹⁶ One 1885 article described Syrians as “the class of Arab tramps that periodically come over to the United States and make a begging tour through the country. When they see a policeman, they pull out a bundle of beads and pretend to be selling.”¹⁷ Another article reported on a camp of Syrians who stopped in Louisville, Kentucky, on their way to California. Remarking on their strange customs and having interviewed local residents about them, the reporter commented, “They are queer and the children run from them.” Local residents feared that the Syrians would kill them in their sleep.¹⁸

As Syrian populations increased in the early twentieth century, local papers sometimes described peddlers as a type of nuisance to white residents and white businesses. For instance, one newspaper printed its own definition of a peddler: “He invades peoples’ homes and persuades them to buy what they do not want.”¹⁹ In Guthrie, Oklahoma, retailers attempted to raise license fees to drive peddlers from town.²⁰ Indeed, Syrians were frequently mentioned in the press when they were arrested and fined for peddling without a license. The imposition of licensing

was one way that small towns attempted to prevent peddlers from competing with local brick-and-mortar businesses.²¹ In El Paso, Texas, the local paper aggressively characterized the rise of Syrian business ventures (“Syrians Grabbing the Business of El Paso”).²² In the Oklahoma Panhandle, newspaper editors plainly told residents not to buy from Syrian peddlers. After speaking with two Syrian peddlers who told them that business had not been good of late, the editors asserted that “our people” had merchants who already served the community well. “Stick to your town and her business people,” they proclaimed; “they are the fellows who stick to you. The others ‘stick it’ to you.”²³

These warnings and mischaracterizations of peddlers enacted a kind of “white sovereign entrepreneurial terror” in which, following Kyla Wazana Tompkins, capital and whiteness as property are sutured, “making entrepreneurialism and whiteness coeval terms predicated upon a biopolitical logic that metes out death and propertylessness, hunger and debility as natural outcomes for those against whom whiteness is wielded.”²⁴ These reactions to Syrian peddlers can also be understood through the distinguishing framework of “legitimate” versus vernacular capitalists. Rather than circulating capital “for the benefit of the public,” the peddling ecology relied on kinship networks for labor and recirculated capital largely within those same family structures.²⁵

These discursive characterizations echo in the recuperative measures taken by early Arab American scholarly and community activist texts. Many of these works noted that peddling was a temporary profession that suited Syrians’ intentions of returning home after earning money rather than remaining in the United States.²⁶ Narrative maneuvering, however, could transform this fact of convenience into evidence of Syrians’ propensity for and commitment to capitalism. A 1985 edited volume published by the Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee took issue with the “persistent notion” that Arabs immigrated to be peddlers and that they were “predisposed toward entrepreneurial activity.”²⁷ Emphasizing Syrians’ entrepreneurial nature and clever adaptability in peddling work became a strategy for responding to these historical discourses that maligned Syrian peddlers. Naff commented on this same tendency: “In Arab American folklore, stories about immigrant entrepreneurs are second in popularity only to stories about immigrant peddlers. We have liked to think of our forefathers as independent businessmen who disdained to work for others and had the courage, against all odds, to strike out on their own.”²⁸

Peddling was consequently viewed as the starting point in a trajectory that ended in “success and middle-class status.”²⁹ Regarding some peddlers’ transition to opening brick-and-mortar businesses with the capital they made in peddling, Naff called these shifts “evolutionary stages” in peddling: “They were no longer the humble pack peddler. They saw themselves and acted as ‘classier salesmen dealing with classier people.’”³⁰ In a settled business and personal life, one would own a physical storefront, cease the frequent travel that peddling entailed, and engage

in marriage and reproduction—all things that were part and parcel of assimilating into white, middle-class Americanness.

These narratives attempted to reposition the peddler as a capitalist at heart: not a threat but rather someone compatible with white American capitalism. “Syrian immigration and rapid modernization were fortuitously compatible,” Naff argued, and the Syrian peddling sector “revitalized . . . an anachronistic enterprise and made it function successfully within a technologically oriented economy.”³¹ Naff situated Syrian peddlers as having filled a niche opened by the rapid industrialization of the late nineteenth century—specifically, the gap created by the isolation of rural communities from goods and services as urban populations swelled. In linking peddling with capitalism and entrepreneurship, these narratives revised the labor of peddling, and the economy that supported it, to be normative in the US context.

Other scholars have noted that Syrian peddling was merely a product of the opportunities available to them, in particular the possibilities created by a racially segregated economy. In places like Mississippi and Alabama, Syrians peddled to the Black communities that white American entrepreneurs ignored. This strategy also forced Syrians to acknowledge and navigate the crosshairs of racist, nationalist, and in some cases anti-Catholic prejudice. Joseph Schechla noted that although Syrians in Mississippi interacted with Black Mississippians through peddling, they did not identify with them, contributing instead to maintaining the color line.³² For Maronites in Alabama, this system brought both dangers and benefits: “Certainly they, especially the darker-skinned Lebanese, experienced painful moments: every time they used public facilities they faced possible challenges to their race; similarly, each farmhouse that a peddler approached required the reestablishment of racial identity and the possibility of anti-foreign and anti-Catholic prejudice. At the same time, the Lebanese benefited from segregation: racial bifurcation promoted their economic ascendance.”³³ In El Paso, Texas, and surrounding areas, Syrians peddled to working-class Mexican Americans to such an extent that the Spanish term *árabe* became synonymous with merchant.³⁴ Some Syrians on both sides of the US-Mexico border crossed it to peddle to their customers.

The press’s discursive violence that positioned Syrian peddlers as threatening to white capital also relied on stoking white gendered fears of Syrian sexuality. A lengthy article published in 1898 examined the influx of “undesirable” immigrants coming through Ellis Island. Focusing on Syrians in particular, the author described Syrian peddlers as pests throughout the South and West who were able to skirt immigration laws by “complying with the letter of the law” through their marriage claims. Upon arrival at Ellis Island, the author claimed, each Syrian would find an “immigration husband” or “immigration wife”—that is, another Syrian who would pose as a spouse for legal entry requirements: “A Syrian woman with a child is considered specially valuable as a peddler in the streets of towns. The husband who meets her is not likely to know how old his wife is, when or

where she was born, or even her name. . . . But he never fails in demonstrations of family love. He is most passionate in outward devotion to his immigration wife.” An illustration of a tarboush-wearing man embracing a woman who holds a baby accompanied this section of the article, with the reiterating caption “He never fails in demonstrations.” Immigration officials whom the report quoted were convinced that a single Syrian man would pose as a husband for up to five or six women, who were then by law allowed to enter the country.³⁵ This article implied not only that such Syrians were skirting immigration laws but that Syrian men used this trick also to engage in sexual relations with multiple women simultaneously.

Although fictional representations of such fears focused on the potential seduction of white women by peddlers—as, for example, in the poem that opens this chapter—news reports focused on the fear that Syrian peddlers would sexually assault white women customers. Several articles specifically highlighted fraught interactions between Syrian peddlers and white women, amplifying white fears of racialized sexual violence. A 1918 article told of a Syrian peddler “prophet” in Washington, DC, who also offered healing services in the form of charms and amulets. Though sensational to a white American clientele, amulets were commonly used by Arab women.³⁶ Two days before the article’s publication, Waharaut Barakat had come to the home of Estrella Keyes to sell laces and embroidery. After Barakat “hinted at occult powers,” according to the article, Keyes asked him to come back later and then notified the police. Once he returned, the two discussed Keyes’s inability to have children. Barakat then gave her a collection of charms with instructions for their use and promised that they would help her become pregnant. The article called this interaction between Barakat and Keyes a “séance” and reported that he attempted to embrace her after she paid him five dollars for the service. The woman then cried out, and the police, who were hiding in an adjacent room, arrested him. He was charged with “telling fortunes without a license” and with assault.³⁷ Another article, from 1910, accused a Syrian peddler of setting fire to a woman’s home in Lehi, Utah. The unnamed peddler had previously visited the woman to sell his goods. She accused him of “attacking and assaulting” her. He was arrested and convicted and spent two months in jail. The paper reported that, while incarcerated, he vowed to have his revenge upon his release.³⁸

Another report, from New York in 1905, told of the attempted lynching of a Syrian peddler after he was found alone in his tenement room with two young girls. An Irish mother went looking for her eleven-year-old daughter one day when she had not come home after school. After asking others in the neighborhood, she was directed to the room of an older Syrian man. Inside, she found her daughter and another girl, aged nine, alone with the man. Police apprehended him, but the girl’s father attempted to lynch him in the street. As the father tried to rally the crowd of onlookers to assist him, he yelled, “Are ye men or Syrians?” The father’s hypothetical question sutured normative binary gender to sexuality by juxtaposing manhood against the depraved and violent sexuality of Syrians that this story implied.

Instead of assisting in the lynching, the mother and other onlookers prevented the father from inflicting any more violence on the Syrian man. This shocking report—reprinted across the country, including in Oklahoma and Arkansas—featured a drawing depicting the lynching scene.³⁹ Collectively, these reports centered on the fears of white consumers and produced for readers a “pleasurable fiction of threat at any moment, facilitating the performance of a grotesque and melodramatic victimhood.”⁴⁰

One article depicting the racialized and sexualized fear of peddlers perhaps best embodies the racial contradictions Syrians experienced in the United States. In August 1903 nineteen-year-old Rasheed Saliney, a jewelry peddler, was being held in the Greer County jail in Oklahoma for the “attempted assault” of one of his customers: a white woman named Effie Witt.⁴¹ According to census records, Saliney had arrived from Syria only the year prior. Although the alleged assault had taken place in nearby Roger Mills County, Saliney was taken to Greer County because police feared that he would be lynched if he remained where the alleged assault took place. The encounter between Saliney, a Syrian man, and Witt, a white American woman, was a racialized, gendered, and sexualized encounter. The accusation of assault (assumed to be sexual) and the fear of a lynching point to the historical structures that positioned men of color, particularly Black men, as sexually predatory toward white women. Yet the fact that police moved Saliney to another county complicates a simplistic narrative of the Arab immigrant at odds with white American power. This move was a protective measure; in some sense, the local police were aligned with (or at least sympathetic to) Saliney. That he was moved to a county where other Syrians, including relatives, lived meant that he would have recourse to support there, rather than remaining in a place where he may have known no one and had fewer possible allies.

The unreliability of these sensationalized accounts, along with the difficulty that Americans had with Arabic names, makes verifying these events and their aftermath a process of repeating dead ends. Regardless of the accounts’ veracity, however, each of these press appearances of Syrians highlights the anxieties white settlers had about Syrians’ sexual excess, apparent lack of desire to become US citizens, and transience. In many cases, but not exclusively, these accounts demonstrate the vulnerability of Syrian men as peddlers, in contrast to the threats they were assumed to pose to white women. By reiterating Syrian men’s removal from Syrian wives through migration and peddling, this discourse was one of “deviant heterosexuality.”⁴² However, peddling in the diaspora did open new possibilities for living out one’s sexuality differently, such as by delaying or refusing marriage, taking on multiple wives in different locations, or experiencing sexual intimacies not sanctioned by heterosexual marriage. While inflammatory, these media narratives also highlight the ways Syrian men could become untethered from community sexual norms on their peddling routes.

TRACKING DOWN PEDDLER SEXUALITY:
FAMILY FICTIONS

These media representations show how sexuality was on the minds of Americans as they confronted the difference of Arabs in their midst. There is a blurriness here between representation and the materiality of historical experience. Because these media stories are sensational, fantastical, violent, and titillating, it would be easy to cast all of these representations as based purely in Orientalism and white supremacy and to carve out an oppositional understanding of Syrian migrant sexuality—perhaps one that fit better with white, middle-class sensibilities of the time. But to do so would ignore the material realities of peddling and the opportunities it created for exploring new sexual encounters and erotic lives.

If these articles represent a set of complex realities about Syrians, migration, and peddling, then, as historical artifacts, they indicate that migration and long-distance peddling did enable some Syrian men to break the sexual expectations set for them. Indeed, historical evidence corroborates this indication with regard to migration. For instance, Sultana Alkazin came to Philadelphia from Beirut around 1901. She arrived with her three children after her husband—who had emigrated sometime before—sent for them. To her surprise, however, she found that her husband was now with another woman, with whom he had fathered children. Her husband hoped that they would all live together, but for Sultana, this was not acceptable. So she took her children and moved to Atlantic City, New Jersey, which had an established Syrian peddling community.⁴³ Religious leaders were similarly concerned about the opportunities for different sexual intimacies that transatlantic distance enabled. They witnessed some men abandoning wives or engaging in “extraofficial polygamy” in the Americas. When men returned to Syria to marry, some leaders required “letters of certification” indicating that they had not already taken wives abroad.⁴⁴ How the absence of a wife was certified, and by whom, is unclear.

My great-great-grandfather may have been one such man. George Karem—son of Karem, who was son of Michael—was born in Hamat, in the northern part of present-day Lebanon. The names of the women from whom George Karem descended have been omitted from the family tree and from oral retellings of the family’s history, reinforced by patriarchal naming practices. In the late nineteenth century, George and one of his sons came to the United States, staying first in Louisville, Kentucky, where he had relatives. From there, he peddled throughout the South. All of his children had also been born in Hamat, and they and their mother, Mary, came one by one to the United States. Mary and her youngest son, Nick, were the last to arrive. But by the time they arrived in Louisville to join George, he was nowhere to be found.

The first time I asked a family member what happened to George Karem, I was told that he had died in Vicksburg, Mississippi, which had an established but

small Syrian community. I made a notation next to his name on the family tree: “died in Vicksburg, Mississippi.” My mother remembered that her father (Philip, a grandson of George) told her this, but no one can confirm when or how George died. Several years later I asked again about George. My great-uncle, another of George’s grandsons, said that after establishing himself with steady work in the United States, George was supposed to send for his wife and children—but he never did. All his family knew was that he was “gone.” A cousin who attended a medical convention in Alabama about thirty years ago added fuel to the rumor when he returned and told the family that several people had either mistaken him for another Lebanese American man who was local or asked him whether he was related to a local Lebanese American family.⁴⁵

Attempts to trace this history or corroborate any of these possibilities lead in circles. This section narrates my circuitous attempts to verify what happened to George Karem and the role that the ecology of peddling played in his disappearance. Using my own family history allows me to foreground the affective nature of historical-grounded imagining—the queer method I use—in examining the ecology of peddling. By explicitly tracing my own route through the archival research process regarding my ancestor, I make visible my own desire and analytical decisions and reiterate the suturing of discursive and embodied histories to one another.

One possibility is that, by 1900, George was living in Louisville, having arrived in the United States two years earlier. The 1900 census lists a George Karem as a notions peddler (that is, a seller of small, household items) who lived at the home of his cousins, Salaam and Karem Shaheen, with cousin Karem’s wife and children and another cousin, who appears on the census as Narzna). All of the adult males in the household worked as notions peddlers. The census also indicates that George had been married for five years by this time and that he was born in 1873. The document makes no mention of the son who had supposedly immigrated with him. However, if this is the correct George Karem, this listing opens additional and unexpected questions. The life of George’s wife, Mary, and their children are traceable and verifiable. They first appear in the 1920 census, though they had all immigrated by 1907, according to the youngest son’s naturalization papers. Mary was born in 1854, according to her death certificate. If we take this George Karem to be the correct one, this birthdate put Mary at more than twenty years her husband’s senior. And the birth years of George and Mary’s known children make this arrangement more interesting—or make this George Karem unlikely to be the correct one. George and Mary Karem had five children: Karem George (born 1882), Isaac (born 1884), Foshmiah (also known as Fannie, born 1885), Jameelah (born 1890), and Nicholas (the aforementioned Nick, born 1895). Given the dates of the children’s births in relation to their parents, however, either the first four children were from a previous relationship, or George and Mary had them out of wedlock. The former is more likely, as George would have been only nine years old when the first child was born. So we can conclude that this is the wrong George Karem.

Another possibility in the census records is a George Karem who appears on the 1910 census as living in Louisville. This George was also a peddler, was born in 1869, and had been married for fifteen years. He was a boarder at the home of another Syrian family. If this second prospect is the correct George Karem, he would have been slightly older than the George in the 1900 census—but he would still have been significantly younger than his wife, and there are the same issues with the timing of children's births.

Or could we consider the George Karam who was born in 1863 and died in 1910 in Bangor, Maine?⁴⁶ His gravesite has a tombstone, but no other evidence of his life seems to be traceable through traditional archival methods. At the turn of the century, a few hundred Syrians were living in Maine, and the largest group lived in Bangor.⁴⁷ If this third prospect is the correct George, then it seems more plausible that all of George and Mary's five children were his biological offspring. His death in 1910 would also track with his family's arrival in the early twentieth century without having further contact with him. But Bangor is a long way from Vicksburg.

One of several other possibilities was Karem George Karem, sometimes written as Karem George, who was born in Hamat and lived part of his life in Vicksburg. He married Azizie Mfarge in Vicksburg in 1911 and became a naturalized citizen in 1920. The two later moved to Santa Monica, California, and had five children together. California may have been far enough from Kentucky for George to live a new life with his new family. But the excitement of finding this potential match (given the name, birth location, and residence in Vicksburg) had clouded my judgment. I had overlooked this George's birthdate and eventually realized that this was the oldest son of the correct George Karem. Of course, then, one simple but unsatisfying possibility is that George Karem left no historical trace in either US government or Arab American community records.

Given the ubiquity of the names George and Karem, and the common inversion of them due to the difference in Syrian and American naming practices, my repeated attempts to track historical evidence of George Karem's life in the United States have over and over again given me hope that he can be found—and over and over again proved fruitless. My desire to find George Karem in the archives is so strong that every instance of revising or proofreading this chapter has resulted in another round of archival searching and verification. But this process has also opened questions of how possible it might have been for an immigrant to change his identity, forge a new life, and leave an old one behind, all in a strange land not of his kin. Left with this information, we are given options of disavowal and of probability. What was more probable, and on what do we base this assessment?

As I began my foray into census and immigration documents, I acknowledged my desire to find the archival proof of his familial abandonment. I suspect that George Karem was a bigamist; I want to know this and substantiate it. I am reminded of Saidiya Hartman's words that "the loss of stories sharpens the hunger

for them.”⁴⁸ Yet, even as my own scholarly inquest turned toward his life, what surfaced was perhaps an equally, if not more, riveting question regarding the life of George’s wife, Mary. Given the possibility of a sharp age difference between Mary and George, several questions surfaced. Could Mary have had a husband before George? Or a lover out of wedlock? Could any of her children have been the product of sexual violence? Would any of those possibilities have diminished her chances of securing a future through marriage? Few people in my family seem to remember or recount a significant age difference between George and Mary—an age difference that is culturally and historically constructed. Perhaps George’s disappearance facilitated the forgetting of this important detail. Perhaps along with it, the details of Mary’s life before her marriage to George succumbed to forgetting as well. Perhaps there was no age difference at all, or perhaps it was not seen as socially significant at the time.

Once I began to ask about Mary, rather than George, I learned another piece of family scandal. Apparently, Mary had an affair with the husband of Fannie, her eldest daughter, who was recorded as living with her in the 1930 census. After this affair, Fannie’s husband fled to South America. The listing of Fannie as widowed on the census can be traced to her husband’s flight. The normalization of George and Mary’s union and George’s “death” may have occluded intergenerational knowledge about the realities of the village economy in Syria, including negotiations about marriage, family relationships, and sex that fell outside what was deemed traditional. Most certainly, those who knew the origins of Mary and George’s relationship crossed the Atlantic as well, but the articulation of this knowledge may not have. In this sense, a focus on Syrian men and sexuality does not necessarily mean that Syrian women are absent; rather it means that we must look for them (and their sexuality) in different places and by different means.

While many details of my ancestors’ lives can be verified through census records, city directories, and other vital documents, the aspects of their lives that point to sexual nonnormativity are harder to pin down through traditional historical methods. These details linger in incomplete and sometimes intentionally obscured family histories and in speculation passed down through the generations. Perhaps George Karem had betrayed his duties as a husband and a father. Maybe Mary Karem was sexual in ways that exceeded the bounds of community expectations. We can say with greater certainty that with sex and relationships came control, obligation, and discipline. These truths also point to the labor of peddling as a crucial factor in this sexual excess. Because peddling facilitated the physical distance between him and his diasporic kin, this profession enabled and masked George Karem’s (potential and actual) deviations from heteronormative community obligations.

Despite the small size of the Syrian community, male Syrian peddlers appeared frequently in US popular culture. The majority of these appearances reiterate the same set of ideas about Syrian peddlers that the press echoed, including the

excitement engendered by the goods they offered, their propensity to manipulate their customers, and the seductiveness and unreliability of their Oriental sensibilities. In the second half of this chapter, I turn to the literary iterations of the Syrian peddler in the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* and the derivative musical and film productions of *Oklahoma!* in order to delve into the meaning produced by fictional representations of Syrian peddlers and to consider how these representations shaped the possibilities that Syrians saw for themselves in the United States. Both *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *Oklahoma!* showcase the same sexual and racial anxieties about peddlers that we find demonstrated in press coverage and personal accounts of Syrian peddlers. The different role and resolution of the peddler's story lines in these texts, however, further highlight the liminality and malleability of Middle Eastern racial positioning and the central role of sexuality in it.

A PEDDLER ICON: ALI HAKIM

Few would recognize the best-known representation of a Syrian peddler on stage and screen, even though it continues to circulate as part of US popular culture today. Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* exemplifies the portrayal of the peddler as an exotic and manipulative threat. It also—at its inception—cemented the image of the Syrian peddler in the public imagination for years to come. Set in what was called Indian Territory in the early 1900s, shortly before the state of Oklahoma was admitted to the United States, the plot revolves around settler matchmaking, feuds between cowboys and farmers, and glorified narratives of US democracy and the western frontier.⁴⁹ *Oklahoma!* was revolutionary for the American genre of musicals, as it was the first to fully integrate musical numbers into the plot. It was also the longest-running show of its time. With its first production in 1943, *Oklahoma!* became an instant success; it ran for five years on Broadway, for three years in London's West End, and then for another ten years in the United States with a second company.⁵⁰ *Oklahoma!* continues to be performed today in amateur as well as professional productions. In 2007, the 1955 film version of *Oklahoma!* was added to the National Film Registry, which catalogs films of cultural, artistic, or historic importance to the nation.

Amid an almost entirely Euro-American cast, *Oklahoma!* features a lone non-European figure: the Persian peddler, Ali Hakim. While this Southwest Asian migrant figure's presence could be viewed as an anomaly in the midst of American homesteading life, he was anything but. Indeed, immigrant peddlers were a common feature of rural life from the latter part of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Despite his character's description as Persian, Ali Hakim is commonly perceived to be an Ashkenazi Jewish character because of the stereotypes he embodies and because of the association between peddling and Ashkenazi Jews. However, *Oklahoma!* was based on a play written more than a decade earlier by queer Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs: *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In Riggs's

play, the peddler character was Syrian and was modeled on an actual Syrian peddler from Riggs's childhood in the Cherokee Nation. Despite the character's Syrian origins, however, the Arabness of the peddler has not been critically analyzed.

The character's journey from "Syrian" to "Persian" in the development of *Oklahoma!* is somewhat of a mystery. The character started as a Syrian peddler with no name in Riggs's play; but in the first two drafts of the musical, the peddler became an Armenian by the name of Kalenderian Kalazian.⁵¹ How and why Rodgers and Hammerstein departed from "Syrian" and arrived at "Armenian" is unclear, but soon enough "Armenian" also disappeared and the peddler became Ali Hakim, the Persian. Tim Carter, who has extensively chronicled the life of *Oklahoma!* speculates that the Armenian background was dropped because the first director of the show, Rouben Mamoulian, was himself actually Armenian.⁵² The shift away from an Armenian character here was an acknowledgment of the caricature of the peddler. In addition to these nationality labels, the peddler character was also referred to as "Turkish" in correspondence regarding casting.⁵³ None of these sources acknowledge the Syrian peddler from Riggs's original play.

Although the rationale for each change in the national origin of the peddler is unknown, the coherence among the changes is clear. Rodgers and Hammerstein made decisions that enabled the peddler to retain his Middle Eastern origins (as written by Riggs) and simultaneously imbued him with what they understood as (Ashkenazi) Jewish stereotypes. The positioning and analysis of Ali Hakim as a Jewish character who is also assumed to be of European origin has proceeded through three routes. First, the character of Hakim has been described as a white ethnic whose storyline is a lesson in assimilation for American Jews. Second, some of the most prominent actors to portray the peddler character (including its earlier version in Riggs's play) have been Ashkenazi Jews, including Joseph Buloff, Lee Strasberg, and Bruce Adler, all of whom had ties to Yiddish theater traditions. Finally, Ali Hakim has been understood as an authorial figure representing his Jewish creators, Rodgers and Hammerstein.⁵⁴ Susan Kollin notes that the "often overlooked history of struggle" of Arabs and Iranians in the United States "has been frequently set aside in scholarly readings that position the figure of the peddler as a stand-in for other marginalized groups in America."⁵⁵ What, then, does it mean that a Middle Eastern character was a permissible and effective vehicle to convey Jewish stereotypes? And what is the significance of rendering the Syrian origin of Riggs's character negligible? Rather than taking the Middle Eastern trait of the peddler as a metaphor, I account for both the Arab origins of the peddler and the Ashkenazi Jewish influence on the creation of Ali Hakim, revealing the interdependence of early Arab (and more broadly Southwest Asian and North African, or SWANA) and Ashkenazi Jewish racializations in the United States, as well as the sexualized dimensions of Arab racialization.⁵⁶

Although the character of Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!* has been linked to stereotypical representations of Jews and was recognizable to American audiences

because of the prominence of Jews in peddling professions throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, I analyze the Arabness of the peddler to reveal two interventions.⁵⁷ First, the interdependence of Jewish and Arab racializations surfaces and necessarily levels a blow to the ontological dichotomy between Arab and Jew. This dichotomy originates in Zionist rhetoric; its maintenance upholds the displacement of Palestinians and the denial of Palestinian sovereignty, as well as the narrative that Arab (and other Middle Eastern and North African) Jews can only find belonging in Israel.⁵⁸ Second, taking seriously the peddler character's Arabness highlights the figure's queerness, sexual anxieties, and these anxieties' centrality to Southwest Asian racialization. My analysis shows that the jokes relating to Ali Hakim's effeminacy and sexuality in *Oklahoma!* cannot be separated from the character's racialization as Arab and Southwest Asian. These jokes function to render the peddler queer, both by questioning the normativity of his sexuality and gender and by setting him apart from the settler community. In addition to relating to the peddler's ethnic background, this queerness stemmed from the anxieties about transient labor and homeless men that grew in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁹

In the two decades before the state of Oklahoma was established, the white settlers who came to Indian Territory were emboldened by the doctrine of manifest destiny. They saw themselves as would-be yeomen, entitled to produce a life from the land and to own the land that they worked.⁶⁰ Their whiteness was the key to this entitlement. But when many of these poor white settlers became tenant farmers, rather than landowners, this sense of entitlement fueled both the white radicalism of labor struggles and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the early decades of twentieth century.⁶¹ The concept of settlement encompassed not only staying put but also private property ownership, business practices tied to that property (e.g., farming or running a store), and, significantly, heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Syrian peddlers were economically useful in this setting by providing goods to white settlers in spaces where goods were not easily accessible. In this context, Syrian peddlers, as racially ambiguous members of the Oklahoma and Indian Territory landscapes, were not especially urgent sites for white nationalist investment. Their economic usefulness outweighed the threat they posed to white supremacy.

Despite this mixture of usefulness and racial insignificance, however, the transient practices of peddling and the sexual implications of that transience were unsettling. This is an example of peddlers' liminal racial position. Their small numbers, in addition to the uncertainty regarding their race, shielded them from a certain amount of white supremacist targeting. But they were not clearly white enough to exempt them completely from racialized violence. The anxieties about Syrian male peddlers point to their transgression of each of these elements.

While *Green Grow the Lilacs* gives little attention to the Syrian peddler character's story, *Oklahoma!* resolves the anxieties surrounding Syrian peddlers through their inclusion in the community: an inclusion via forced sexual, gender, and

economic assimilation. This resolution is an example of how a specific heteronormative economy was essential to the settler colonial project.⁶² Examining the social history of peddlers in Oklahoma and other rural spaces adds context for understanding how these fictional representations accrued meaning.

MINOR ENCOUNTERS: LYNN RIGGS'S *GREEN GROW*
THE LILACS (1931) AND *KNIVES FROM SYRIA* (1925)

Riggs's plays are filled with the characters of his childhood in the displaced Cherokee Nation. Riggs was born in 1899 near Claremore, in what would later become Oklahoma, to a Cherokee mother and a white father who was a naturalized Cherokee citizen. Riggs's mother died in his childhood, and his father remarried another Cherokee woman, who raised him.⁶³ He had a difficult relationship with his father. Riggs spent most of his life living between Santa Fe and New York City, but the life of his imagination remained with his childhood home.

When asked about the characters of his youth, Riggs wrote:

It so happens that I knew mostly the dark ones, the unprivileged ones, the ones with the most desolate fields, the most dismal skies. And so it isn't surprising that my plays concern themselves with poor farmers, forlorn wives, tortured youth, plow hands, peddlers, criminals, slaves—with all the range of folk victimized by brutality, ignorance, superstition, and dread. And will it sound like an affectation (it most surely is not) if I say that I wanted to give voice and a dignified existence to people who found themselves, most pitifully, without a voice, when there was so much to be cried out against?⁶⁴

Riggs was a queer, mixed-heritage Cherokee playwright who wrote in the first half of the twentieth century. It is not a stretch, then, to propose that his childhood was one in which he felt outcast, and thus it is not surprising that he wrote about others who were outcast as well. Kirby Brown describes Riggs's oeuvre as "one Cherokee's attempt to contend with the chaotic aftermath of allotment and statehood during the early decades of the twentieth century."⁶⁵

Riggs wrote *Green Grow the Lilacs* in 1929; it was first produced on Broadway in 1931. It ran for sixty-four performances (approximately two months), toured throughout the Midwest, and was later nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.⁶⁶ The play tells of the courtship between Laurey Williams, an orphaned landowner who lives with her widowed Aunt Eller, and Curly McLain, a local cowboy. The central obstacle to their love is Jeeter, a farmhand living and working on Laurey's property. Riggs's play included a number of folk songs, which were later replaced in *Oklahoma!* by Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical score.

The unnamed peddler appears in only two scenes: first when he comes with Ado Annie to visit Aunt Eller and Laurey, and then in the following scene, when he sells Jeeter a knife. The character of the peddler is unnamed in the script and

described as “Syrian.” He first enters the play as he is traveling his peddling route accompanied by Ado Annie. His character is constituted immediately as dishonest, manipulative, and seductive. Aunt Eller is furious with him for having sold her, during his previous visit, an eggbeater that was promised to do much more than beat eggs. In response, the peddler mocks her fury by offering her another one. Laurey is concerned about Ado Annie’s naivete and reminds her that peddlers are not to be trusted with matters of the heart. Laurey cautions Ado Annie against a relationship with the peddler: “You don’t want to git to like a peddler man *too* good, Ado Annie. You hear me? They got wives in ever’ state in the union.”⁶⁷ Signaling that the sexual danger of peddlers was common knowledge, this statement mirrors many people’s anxieties about the purported detachment of peddlers and other migratory men from their home communities and normative family structures. As the peddler greets Laurey, he excitedly remarks how much she has grown up and kisses her along her hand and arm. Laurey rebuffs his flirtatiousness, but Riggs’s stage directions indicate that she is “a little pleased, in spite of herself.”⁶⁸ Laurey has a back-and-forth with Ado Annie, again marking the peddler as a primarily sexual being. Laurey asks Annie, “Is that the way he talks to you?” When Annie replies, “Aw, he don’t talk to me,” Laurey exclaims, “Mercy, whut does he *do* to you!”⁶⁹ Significantly, this scene takes place in Laurey’s bedroom, where they have gathered to look at the peddler’s goods for sale. The peddler may have a scheme to be alone in the room with the young women, as the script has him suggest to Aunt Eller that he has merchandise for her outside with his horse. Aunt Eller exclaims, “Not gonna leave you and two girls in no bedroom, all by yerselves.”⁷⁰

The seduction surrounding the peddler is equally about his merchandise and his uncommon origins. Laurey works herself into an “abstracted ecstasy” when dreaming aloud of the things she’d like to have. Laurey’s monologue delves into the close associations among middle-class white femininity, desire, consumption, and fantasy: “Want things I cain’t tell you about. Cain’t see ’em clear. Things nobody ever heard of. . . . Not only things to look at and hold in yer hands. Things to happen to you! Things so nice if they ever did happen yer heart ud quit beatin’, you’d fall down dead. They ain’t no end to the things I want. Everything you got wouldn’t be a starter fer me, Mister Peddler Man!”⁷¹ Laurey’s desires are simultaneously material, bodily, and spiritual, alluding to the exotic (“things nobody ever heard of”), the experiential (“things to happen to you”), and the insatiable (“they ain’t no end to the things I want”) as essential components of the existential questions of Laurey’s life. The language of her monologue mirrors the rising importance of commercial consumption and its constructed connection to emotional fulfillment in the cultivation of a white, middle-class femininity.⁷² Although Laurey is not presented as middle-class, she has inherited land from her parents and exhibits an aspiration to upward mobility through the items and life she desires. The acquisition of exotic items was a way for the working classes to demonstrate their middle-class ambitions. Each of these desires could also be sexual. Merchandise from the

so-called Orient, particularly items associated with the Ottoman Empire, invoked the sexualized space of the harem.⁷³

The labor of the Syrian peddler, then, helped constitute his buyers as white, middle-class (or middle-class-aspiring) American women. Both the body of the peddler—in its racialized and sexualized form of difference symbolizing “the East”—and the goods the peddler provided contributed to this labor. Cosmopolitanism, or the display of knowledge of the world beyond one’s local confines, was essential to this consumption, and a racial and imperial hierarchy was part of that cosmopolitanism.⁷⁴ Syrian peddlers and the cultures they represented (for consumption) could be desired, but they still had to be reviled; the desire created by the nexus of US empire, Orientalism, and capitalism did not allow an equilibrium of power. Vivek Bald’s scholarship on Bengali Muslim peddlers working in the United States during the same time as Syrian peddlers shows a similar process of desire and revulsion. Bald describes the peddlers as operating “on a thin edge between Indophilia and xenophobia.”⁷⁵

The racialization of the peddler in Riggs’s play is typical of other popular portrayals of Syrian peddlers. The peddler is described in the stage directions as “a little wiry, swarthy Syrian . . . very acquisitive, very cunning . . . his beady little eyes sparkling professionally.”⁷⁶ In production photographs from the Theatre Guild’s 1931 staging of *Green Grow the Lilacs* (see figure 1), Lee Strasberg, the actor playing the peddler, appears to be wearing dark eyeliner, facial hair, and makeup to darken his skin. The eyeliner accentuates his “beady little eyes,” and the styling of the facial hair invokes racist representations of East Asian men. Here, the peddler is an Orientalist representation of Southwest Asian immigrants. Although the peddler was played by a well-known Ashkenazi Jewish actor in this production, the stage makeup turned the Ashkenazi into the Syrian.

Green Grow the Lilacs was not Riggs’s first portrayal of a Syrian. Described as “a comic melodrama of Oklahoma country life,” his one-act play *Knives from Syria* (1925) also has a peddler character. It too takes place near Claremore, but about twenty years after the setting of *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Given that it is a one-act play, its characters and plot are not greatly elaborated, but the central theme of unattached women in Oklahoma is the same. A woman and her daughter live alone and survive with the help of a farmhand. The daughter is betrothed to the farmhand but becomes interested in a Syrian peddler (again, unnamed) who visits them frequently. The peddler has written to the daughter and expressed his interest in her; the mother is disgusted by the prospect, but the daughter’s desire for the peddler (and the life associated with his transient work) grows. While the daughter is excited by the travel that marriage to a peddler would offer her, the mother warns her that a Syrian peddler would beat her and that they would not have a place to live.⁷⁷ The climax of the story occurs when the peddler returns to town and shows the mother and daughter a collection of Syrian knives, among other merchandise. When they see the knives, both mother and daughter fear that the



FIGURE 1. “Laurey’s Bedroom Scene. L to R: June Walker (Laurey), Ruth Chorpenning (Ado Annie), Lee Strasberg (Peddler) and Helen Westley as Aunt Eller Murphy.” Theatre Guild production of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, 1931. Photo by Vandamm Studio©, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

peddler was the perpetrator of a recent attack against their farmhand. In an absurd twist, the threatened mother relents and allows the daughter to marry the peddler. When the mother learns that the farmhand was attacked by someone else, she regrets her decision, as she has lost her daughter to a man she abhors. However, her daughter is eager to leave behind what she feels is a boring life and vows never to return. The play thus revolves around the daughter’s fascination with and desire for the peddler and around the mother’s paranoia about the danger he poses; these foci underscore Riggs’s familiarity with Syrian peddlers and the ways their potential customers received them. In one sense, his plays are well versed in the Orientalism of settler culture and its intertwining of desire with violence.⁷⁸

Syrians had a documented presence in what later became the state of Oklahoma as early as 1874, though they did not appear on census records until 1900.⁷⁹ Because the earliest documentation described the birth of a child to Syrian parents, Syrians were likely in the region even before this date. The Riggs family themselves, including Lynn and his mother, knew Syrian peddlers.⁸⁰ The specificity of the Syrian peddler was important to Riggs’s creative remembering of Indian Territory and Oklahoma, but that specificity was lost on audiences and reviewers.

Reviews of the original run on Broadway in 1931 and the tour in 1932 show that *Green Grow the Lilacs* was generally well received. Strasberg, who played the peddler in the original cast with the Theatre Guild of New York, was rarely mentioned. Many reviews did not even mention the peddler role, and those that did simply referred to the character as “a peddler,” without ethnic description. This corresponds to the way the peddler is listed in the cast of characters (as “A Peddler”), though the dialogue refers to him as Syrian. Some reviews either changed or erroneously described the peddler’s background. A review of the Baltimore production with the original cast described the setting as one in which “the difficult business of subduing the Indians and the soil had been completed by the pioneers’ children” and says that “the Jewish peddler who appears in this play was bringing the first frills of a civilization which lay just over the horizon for the prairie folk.”⁸¹ In this case, the knowledge that Strasberg was a Polish-born Jew, and that peddling was associated in particular with Jewish immigrants, may have overridden the plot’s own indications that the peddler was Syrian. In another instance, a review of the production in Pasadena, California, mentioned the “Hungarian peddler,” who was played by a different actor altogether.⁸²

Only a single review mentioned the peddler’s Syrianness, and obliquely at that. One *New York Times* article charted a genealogy of Riggs’s playwriting and his arrival with a hit in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The piece mentioned *Knives from Syria* and stated that the essence of each of his subsequent six plays can be found in this “experimental one-acter”: “For here is the peddler, a brother to the one in ‘Green Grow the Lilacs,’ who with his samples of an outside world’s adornment stirs romantic longings in an Oklahoma farm girl.”⁸³

The sparse attention that these reviews give the peddler accords with the character’s relatively small role in the play. One could say that this disappearance in the press mirrors the Syrian peddler’s disappearance from the actual plot of *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Although Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical adaptation, *Oklahoma!*, depicts a fairly homogeneous, white settler community, the actual demographics of Indian Territory at this time were drastically different. David Chang’s research on nation, race, and landownership centers on Oklahoma in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries precisely because of its racial diversity. The story of Oklahoma is the story of a “violent transformation” of Native, Black, and white settler relationships to the land, as all three groups had significant presences in both Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1920s.⁸⁴

The dispossession of Native land is central to Chang’s account. The indigenous nations that had lived in the area when Europeans first arrived were displaced after the Indian Removal Act of 1830, as the US government forced tribes in the southeastern United States to relocate to this ever-diminishing area of land designated “Indian Territory.” The Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Cherokees, and Seminoles were forcibly moved along what is commonly known as the Trail of Tears and

resettled in the area that would become Oklahoma. Black Americans also came to this area, in multiple ways. Some escaped slavery in the South and found homes with Native tribes; others were enslaved by Native nations who sided with the Confederacy; and still others came here upon their emancipation, with hopes of owning land and starting new lives. White settlers called “boomers” began coming to this area illegally to take land after the Civil War, when those nations that sided with the Confederacy were forced to cede land to the US government.⁸⁵ Boomers attempted to steal, lease, or otherwise occupy indigenous lands in this region. In 1890 the US government named these lands Oklahoma Territory, which was on the western border of Indian Territory, and opened it for homesteading by settlers.

The story of *Oklahoma!* erases not only this landscape and its history but also the likelihood that Riggs’s characters were themselves meant to be Native.⁸⁶ In contrast to the demographic reality of Indian Territory at the turn of the century, Rodgers and Hammerstein emptied the geography of *Oklahoma!* to make it “the vacant landscape of the myths of dominance.”⁸⁷ Chang suggests that white settlers in Oklahoma were more concerned with Native and Black claims on the land than with a small immigrant population and questions about its whiteness.⁸⁸ This insignificance is mirrored in Riggs’s play, in which the Syrian peddler is irrelevant after two scenes. Like peddling itself, the Syrian facilitates something else—in this case, the story of a community in which he is an outsider. Syrian peddlers were significant enough for Riggs to include them in two works, but they were not the focus of his creative vision.

ADAPTING THE “LAND OF DOMINANCE”:
OKLAHOMA! (1943)

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* is commonly understood to be a musical about American unity and the doctrine of manifest destiny, created to provide uplifting and reassuring entertainment during World War II.⁸⁹ The musical adaptation kept close to the original plot of *Green Grow the Lilacs* and preserved much of Riggs’s text in its script. The names of the major characters remained the same throughout the play and the musical, with two exceptions: Jeeter Fry in *Green Grow the Lilacs* became Jud Fry in *Oklahoma!* and the nameless peddler in the former became Ali Hakim in the latter. Three principal characters were also added to the musical: Will Parker is Ado Annie Carnes’s suitor, who competes with Ali Hakim; Andrew Carnes is Ado Annie’s father; and Gertie Cummings is Ali Hakim’s eventual wife. The storyline involving these characters is essential to the expanded role of the peddler in the musical adaptation.

Although the majority of the characters in the story are portrayed as fully accepted members of the community, two are clearly cast as outsiders. The first is Jud, portrayed as a violent man and a potential sexual predator. Although Jud’s racial origins are not made explicit in the musical, scholars have variously

interpreted his character as symbolizing “bad” Jewishness or Blackness.⁹⁰ The second outsider, the peddler, is the antidote to the violence of Jud’s storyline. Rodgers and Hammerstein greatly expanded the role of the Syrian peddler—now the Persian named Ali Hakim—for the musical. Ali Hakim’s role is that of the jester, providing comic relief for the audience while simultaneously embodying the anxieties about peddlers and Southwest Asians that persevered through the early twentieth century. His storyline is secondary, as it chronicles his flirtation with Ado Annie and her involvement with Will.

Ali enters the story in the same fashion as the peddler does in *Green Grow the Lilacs*: traveling with Ado Annie and stopping at the home of Aunt Eller and Laurey. Instead of taking place inside Laurey’s bedroom, the scene occurs outside, in front of the house. As with Riggs’s Syrian peddler, Ali’s seductiveness is situated between revulsion and excitement. Aunt Eller and Laurey are skeptical and are repulsed by him—but when he shows them what he has for sale, their abhorrence melts away. Once Ali tells Aunt Eller about the lingerie from Paris he can sell her, she stops berating him and instead invites him inside the home for a meal. The peddler’s seduction thus extends to his wares; even those who are suspicious of the quality of his merchandise and the integrity of his sales pitch, like Aunt Eller, are eventually seduced into buying something.

Ali’s associations with manipulation, comedy, seduction, and fantasy are solidified throughout the first act of *Oklahoma!* But the seductiveness of the peddler himself, and particularly his masculinity, is undercut in this version by several elements. First, Ali’s love interest, Ado Annie, is portrayed as a clueless flirt who would leave Ali behind if only she knew better. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Ado Annie is not supposed to be an attractive woman; the stage notes describe her as “an unattractive, stupid-looking farm girl.”⁹¹ Yet in *Oklahoma!* she is as attractive as the lead, Laurey. She still retains the cluelessness of Riggs’s character, but the musical’s emphasis is more on her sexual proclivities. She is portrayed as sexually open, dim-witted, and morally naive. In both versions of the character, Ado Annie is not a respectable woman: she is hypersexual, and her sexuality is not aimed toward reproduction. Thus, one can infer that she is with Ali Hakim because, as her solo musical number suggests, she “cain’t say no,” rather than because of his appeal as a mate. In addition, when Ali greets Laurey and kisses up and down her arm, the Laurey in *Oklahoma!* is affronted. She exhibits none of this flirtation’s “secret pleasure” that we find in Riggs’s stage notes. In the move from 1931 to 1943, the Syrian/Persian peddler has lost some of his desirability.

Ali’s seductiveness is tempered by a second factor: his role as the musical’s comedian. An earlier version of the musical included certain comedic lines that connected gender to Ali’s racial difference from the white settlers. In the earlier version, Ali opens the song “It’s a Scandal! It’s a Outrage!” with the spoken lines: “Friends, / Out in the east, / Out in the east, / A woman’s a slave. / She is bought, / Rented or leased. / Then she’s taught / How to behave!”⁹² In effect, these lyrics set

Ali apart from the other men of Claremore by invoking his imagined relationship to hyperpatriarchal norms of the Islamic East. These lyrics' specific references to enslaving, purchasing, and teaching women "how to behave" invite images of the harem, well known to American audiences by the 1940s. This song is the only one that Ali performs, and it creates a momentary intercultural patriarchal identification between Ali and the male settlers. After Ali has ended up engaged to Ado Annie despite his desire to be single, the men lament together the growing independence of women and the diminishing freedom of men. Ali's difference from white Americans is thereby established through various maneuvers that signal his gender, sexuality, and culture as being distinct and deviant from those of the United States. These lines were cut from the final stage version of the song, but a similar jab at Middle Eastern patriarchy ensues when Ali jokes about the number of wives Persian men have, calling his brother who has only one wife a "bachelor."⁹³

In addition to playing the jester, Ali practices a seduction that offers hints of sexual nonnormativity as well. In one scene, he gives Ado Annie a "Persian goodbye" in front of Will, her white settler fiancé. The joke is that the "Persian goodbye" is a long, passionate kiss. At this point in the story, Ali has been trying to convince Ado Annie that Will is the right husband for her, trying to avoid marrying her himself. As he sings Will's praises, she asks him, "Do you love Will too?" And after Ali gives Ado Annie his "Persian goodbye," he jokes that Will could be the next to receive one. The suggestion of queerness in this joke, by highlighting Ali's failure with women, undermines any possible normative masculinity of the peddler.

In *Oklahoma!* Ali's fate is continually at the mercy of the women he seduces—or, more accurately, at the mercy of their fathers. Ado Annie is convinced that because Ali wants to find "paradise" with her upstairs at the Claremore hotel, he must want to marry her.⁹⁴ In keeping with her character's cluelessness, Ado Annie gladly tells her father the details of their courtship. She says that Ali calls her his "Persian kitten" because they have "soft round tails."⁹⁵ As a result, Annie's father points his shotgun at Ali to force him to agree to marry her. Ali escapes by maneuvering Ado Annie and Will together instead, but later he ends up tricking himself into marriage with another woman, Gertie Cummings. Gertie is distinguished by her piercing, nervous laughter and is clearly portrayed as not the most sought-after woman in the community, which in turn reflects negatively on the peddler's desirability. In an echo of Ali's earlier misfortune with Ado Annie, the union with Gertie is arranged at gunpoint by Gertie's father. Earlier drafts of *Oklahoma!* also introduced another character (cut from the final version) to play opposite Ali: a Mexican woman named Lotta Gonzales, who is described as "sexually active."⁹⁶ While racialized differently than Ado Annie, Lotta Gonzales is also hypersexual and nonreproductive, thus underscoring Ali's deviance in relation to the women in his life. In those drafts, Ali's relationship with Lotta is solidified by the end of the play, a plot move that would have also reinscribed Ali's brownness and blocked his assimilation into the white settler community. Both story lines (the initial draft



FIGURE 2. "Joseph Buloff (Ali Hakim), Celeste Holm (Ado Annie Carnes) and Ralph Riggs (Andrew Carnes) in *Oklahoma!*" St. James Theater, 1943. Photo by Vandamm Studio©, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 1943.

involving Lotta, and the final version with Gertie) involve taming women's sexuality through marriage and, more broadly, disciplining desire—making desire, and especially women's sexual and relationship choices, a major concern of the plot. Both story lines also position the peddler's love interests as less desirable than the female lead, Laurey.

The costuming and body language choices for Ali Hakim also signal his deviation from normative masculinity, as evidenced in the production photographs of the original Broadway cast. In figure 2, Ali's sexual and gender differences are best seen in contrast with Ado Annie's virulent father, Andrew Carnes, and in contrast with Ado Annie as well. The picture depicts the scene in which, after he finds out about Ali's intentions with Ado Annie, Andrew tries to force Ali to marry her at gunpoint. Andrew's monochromatic dark suit jacket, pants, and boots denote an unambiguous masculinity, compared with Ado Annie's light-hued dress and tiers of ruffled fabric. Ali also wears a suit, but his looks unlikely to ever get dirty. His clothing is fancy, in the style of a dandy: entirely patterned in plaid edged with dark piping. The characters' body language mimics this contrast. Andrew's stance is wide-legged, and he points a shotgun in Ali's face. Ali's body is languid,

approaching the shape of the letter S. Rather than holding a gun or another weapon, Ali holds a walking stick, which droops toward the ground. He is not bracing for a fight but rather pointing, or perhaps wagging, his finger in Andrew's direction. Phallic gestures of varying states abound in both men's postures.

In his gendered visual and bodily presentation, Ali Hakim is thus situated between Ado Annie and Andrew Carnes. Not a woman but not fully a man either, in appearance he is more associated with a dandy than with a farmer or a cowboy. This indeterminate positioning echoes the 1920s' discourses about the sheikh character and the fears of increasing effeminacy.⁹⁷ It also builds upon earlier histories in which Arabness and Middle Easternness were discursive vessels through which to express anxieties and fears about other marginalized populations. The figure of the "street Arab" is a prime example. Beginning in mid-nineteenth-century Britain and later in that century in the United States, poor boys who were in public view without parental care, who were either working or just existing on the streets, were characterized as "Arabs" because of their wildness, their lack of supervision, and their apparent lack of rules governing their lives. The starkest example was the use of "Arab" to characterize other nonwhite racialized groups who were similarly deemed "lawless" and "ungoverned."⁹⁸ Films like *The Sheik*, released in 1921, used Arab characters (who were coded either racially or culturally as Arab) as a way to express anxieties about the place of Italian immigrants and their offspring in American society.⁹⁹ In this latter example, as well as in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Ali Hakim*, the Arab or Middle Eastern figure was also a sexualized one, and that sexuality depended on the gendered ambiguity of Middle Eastern masculinity.

Ali's queer masculinity is thus inseparable from his placement in the community as an Oriental foreigner. Despite Rodgers and Hammerstein's intention to create a thinly veiled Ashkenazi Jewish character, the queerness of this figure—his seductiveness, simultaneous effeminacy, and failures with women—underscores the character's Southwest Asian origin and the Orientalism of his creators. The threat of Ali Hakim as both a sexual predator and an effeminate deviant, all embodied in the same individual, is enabled through Orientalist genealogies of cultural difference.¹⁰⁰

Just one year after the end of the US tour, following eleven years of performances since the debut of *Oklahoma!* on Broadway, the film version was made. The movie's script and musical numbers stuck closely to Rodgers and Hammerstein's stage version. While the first two stage iterations of the peddler were played by notable Jewish actors (Lee Strasberg and Joseph Buloff, respectively), the 1955 film features a well-known non-Jewish actor, Eddie Albert. Albert, a character actor who played a range of leading and supporting roles, was not associated with Jewishness or indeed with any particular ethnic characters. Scholars who have examined the transition from musical play to film assert that by the time the film was produced, the character was so well established that the producers found it no longer necessary to make him overtly Jewish.¹⁰¹ The film's Ali is also no longer effeminate like

the one in 1943. Nor is his appearance altered to make him look Middle Eastern, as in the 1931 staging.

Beyond his Persian designation, the only thing that differentiates Albert's Ali from the rest of the Claremore community in the movie is his profession as a peddler and his foreign accent (which is not consistent through the film). Ali's ethnicity in the film functions as an accessory; for all intents and purposes, he is (or has become) white. Also, the peddler's one musical number, "It's a Scandal! It's a Outrage!," was cut from the film. Although the queerness of Ali Hakim was mitigated in the film version by eliminating his effeminacy, the jokes about the "Persian goodbye" and his love for Will remain. He is also still portrayed as a sexual predator. In the beginning, rather than meeting Laurey either inside or outside her home, Ali encounters her swimming in the nearby lake. Laurey scrambles to cover herself with a towel as Ali approaches and begins to remark upon how grown-up she is. As he kisses up her hand and arm, Laurey is visibly affronted, rebuffing Ali's advances in a show of feminine propriety. This difference from both Riggs's play and the stage version of the musical marks Ali Hakim as a clear womanizer. However, his sexuality is no longer intertwined with his supposed non-European origin. As his race is whitened, his sexuality is also whitened, or normalized.

Both the authorship of *Oklahoma!* and the time when it was written illuminate the reasons for the differences between the musical and Riggs's play where the peddler is concerned. Whereas Riggs wrote during the Great Depression, was influenced by his indigeneity, and sought to tell stories of the people he knew in childhood, Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote during World War II and were influenced by their own immigrant and Jewish heritages. In 1943 the United States was at war. American unity, the persecution of Jews under Nazism, and the potential expansion of US empire were all important ideas in popular culture. Rodgers and Hammerstein were two of a number of Jewish artists who helmed American musical theater in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Andrea Most argues that theater during this time was the primary venue through which Jews could articulate their vision of America and carefully insert themselves "as accepted members of the white American community."¹⁰² Most notes that the settling-down of Ali Hakim in the film version of *Oklahoma!* may also have had to do with the impact of Zionism on Rodgers and Hammerstein. Zionism offered the promise of a utopic Jewish state, which was presented as a place where Jews could "return to the soil, become farmers, and claim the land as their own."¹⁰³

In addition, at the time *Oklahoma!* was created, the United States had not yet recovered from the roving army of men looking for work during and after the Depression and their association with perversion. If anything, the Depression-era anxieties surrounding hobos and tramps grew into a full-fledged panic about homosexuality during World War II, as the number of veterans in transient populations grew. Officials feared that these numbers would skyrocket after the war, allowing for increased roaming of the unattached and their abandoning of

familial responsibilities.¹⁰⁴ The GI bill was created for this purpose, for “settling men down after wartime.” In this legislation, the first prohibitions against homosexuality also appeared, as the “vague opposition between mobility and settlement [was] hardening in a clear line between homosexuality and heterosexuality.”¹⁰⁵ The musical’s uneasy humor about the peddler’s potential for queerness, as well as his unrestrained flirtatiousness with women, fit into this rubric of national panic. *Oklahoma!* both spoke to this anxiety in American audiences and appeased them by heterosexualizing and domesticating all elements of sexual deviance in the story, all the while reaffirming American superiority. Later revivals of *Oklahoma!* went on to revise its racist, anti-indigenous, and heteronormative plot, including a 2018 version that changed the characters’ genders and sexual orientations. That particular revival recast Ali as bisexual.¹⁰⁶ Susan Kollin notes that many of these attempts at recuperation have come at the expense of the still-Orientalist peddler character.¹⁰⁷

In Indian Territory and the early days of Oklahoma statehood, Syrian peddlers inhabited contradictory positions. Their economic services were useful, but their racial and cultural difference, seen as a kind of queerness, was threatening to normative American national identity. If the queerness of the peddler was a barrier to the early Syrian immigrant’s integration into white settler societies, forcing the peddler to assimilate through his sexual and economic practices would ostensibly allow him this access. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* illustrates this resolution with the peddler, in what is perhaps its most significant deviation from Riggs’s *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Specifically, while the peddler does not appear in Riggs’s play after the first two scenes, in *Oklahoma!* Ali Hakim’s flirtation with settler women continues. Ali evades marriage to Ado Annie only to find himself trapped in a commitment to Gertie Cummings by the end of the show. Once she announces her marriage to him, Gertie explains: “Ali ain’t goin’ to travel around the country no more. I decided he orta settle down in Bushyhead and run Papa’s store.”¹⁰⁸ The settling here is literal, meaning that Ali must stay put, now living and working in the local community rather than coming and going as he pleases. Reflecting the sexual anxieties about transient male laborers during this period, the settling indicated here also concerns Ali’s life as a bachelor and womanizer. Margot Canaday notes that, in the context of the national panic regarding migratory populations after the Great Depression, “the literal cessation of movement was only a precondition for settling down, which implied not only steady employment and property ownership, but marriage and reproduction as well.”¹⁰⁹ Finally, the settling also points to the transition from Indian Territory to the state of Oklahoma, wherein the peddler is ushered into a different role in the settler colonial project.

We can see the centrality of heteronormativity to the white supremacist, settler colonial project in this process of settling. The narrative strategies of early Arab American scholars and community activists are indicative of the sexual politics of settling as well. These narratives posited peddling as a temporary endeavor that

quickly enabled transient Syrian pioneers to become permanent settlers who operated businesses, married and had children, and contributed to the communities in which they lived. This trajectory thus operated within a binary of transient versus settled. For this binary to function, peddling had to be a temporary endeavor, a profession performed out of necessity and ingenuity. This trajectory might appear in the formulation of going from “Peddlers to Store Owners” or “Peddlers to Professionals,” or perhaps as a settling-down like “Peddlers Find a Home.”¹¹⁰ As peddling routes produced many small Syrian communities across the midwestern and southern United States, Alixa Naff argues, theirs was a process of “piecemeal transition of transients into citizens.” The presumed subject of these narratives, however, was a Syrian man, and he was expected to conform to a particular sexual framework. The transient (peddler) was unattached and thus able to live out sexual relationships in a number of ways, while the citizen (business owner) was married (or looking for a wife) and ready to reproduce his sexual, settler citizenship. In these ways, the overarching binary regarding transience and settlement operated through several other overlapping binaries, each masking these sexual imperatives: ethnic enclave versus dispersed settlements, Syrian nationalist versus American citizen, working class versus middle class, transient versus settled, and migrant versus citizen. All of these binary articulations contributed to an implicit spectrum from Arab or nonwhite to white, and from transient to settler. The route from one to the other was also a sexual one.

The narrative resolution of *Oklahoma!* is a process of assimilation, whitening, and settling for the male Southwest Asian peddler: through his profession and business practices, his mobility and residence, and his sexuality. The musical’s resolution offers a striking contrast to the experiences of violence that Syrian peddlers articulated, and it offers a glimpse of how the possible route toward whiteness for Syrian immigrants was anchored in disciplining sexual norms and in taking on a new role within US settler colonialism. For Syrian women, as the following chapter shows, the responses to their roles in the ecology of peddling were mired in both Syrian and white American essentialist ideologies of womanhood that necessitated women’s sexual role within the Syrian immigrant family.